DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 446 522 HE 033 354

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TITLE What Is Opportunity? Defining, Operationalizing, and Measuring the Goal of Postsecondary Educational Opportunity. A Concept Paper.

INSTITUTION Institute for Higher Education Policy, Washington, DC.; Education Resources Inst., Boston, MA.; Council for Opportunity in Education, Washington, DC.

PUB DATE 1999-12-00

NOTE 30p.

AVAILABLE FROM Education Resources Institute, 330 Stuart St., Suite 500, Boston, MA 02116-5237. Tel: 800-255-TERI, Ext. 4762; Fax: 617-451-9425. Web site: http://www.teri.org.

PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom (055) -- Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS Academic Standards; *Access to Education; Benchmarking; College Admission; College Attendance; *Educational Opportunities; Enrollment Influences; Higher Education; Policy Formation

ABSTRACT

Asserting that there is so little understanding of what "opportunity" means within the context of access to higher education that use of the word may cloud rather than clarify policy debate, this concept paper served as a resource document to aid participants at a 1999 seminar sponsored by the Council for Opportunity in Education. The paper includes: (1) a discussion of possible definitions of postsecondary opportunity; (2) a review of possible benchmarks of the minimum achievement levels that must be met to ensure opportunity and indicators of that achievement; (3) a discussion of the role of data in defining and measuring opportunity; and (4) an examination of the future agenda for defining, operationalizing, and measuring the parameters of postsecondary educational opportunity. Contains 38 references. (EV)

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What is Opportunity?

Defining, Operationalizing, and Measuring the Goal of Postsecondary Educational Opportunity

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A CONCEPT PAPER

Prepared by The Institute for Higher Education Policy
December, 1999

The Institute for Higher Education Policy
The Education Resources Institute
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OPPORT

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The Institute for Higher Education Policy
The Education Resources Institute
Council for Opportunity in Education

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Acknowledgments

This concept paper was prepared by Colleen O'Brien, Vice President at The Institute for Higher Education Policy, along with Christina Redmond, Project Assistant, Alisa Federico Cunningham, Senior Research Analyst, Thomas Wolanin, Senior Associate, and Jamie Merisotis, President. In addition, Tom Parker and Ann Coles at TERI and Arnold Mitchem, Maureen Hoyler, Holly Hexter, and Katie McGraw at the Council for Opportunity in Education provided writing and editorial assistance.

In addition, The Institute and TERI would like to acknowledge the individuals and organizations who offered information, advice, and feedback for the report. In particular, we would like to thank Clifford Adelman at the U.S. Department of Education and Free Hand Press.

We heartily acknowledge the help of these individuals and organizations and recognize that they are not responsible for any errors of omission or interpretation contained herein.

Foreword

The terms "opportunity," "college opportunity," and "equal opportunity" have been part of the mainstream higher education lexicon for more than three decades. Government policies and programs, college and university-sponsored efforts, and privately-funded projects all use variants of the term to promote higher education goals. Despite this common usage, there is surprisingly little consensus about what opportunity is. In fact, there is so little understanding about what opportunity means—particularly in the public policy context—that the use of the word may actually cloud rather than clarify policy debates.

This dilemma about the long-standing but paradoxically little-understood use of the term opportunity led to the convening of a seminar on the topic in Washington, DC. Sponsored by the Council for Opportunity in Education, the seminar was held on June 21, 1999, and approximately 40 participants from an array of educational, philosophical, and professional perspectives attended. The goal of the seminar was to stimulate dialogue about ways to measure progress in opportunity, leading to future efforts to more precisely document accomplishments and disseminate findings to a broad audience of policymakers, higher education leaders, and the public.

What Is Opportunity? Defining, Operationalizing, and Measuring the Goal of Postsecondary Educational Opportunity, prepared by The Institute for Higher Education Policy and The Education Resources Institute (TERI), was distributed in advance to all seminar participants as a resource document to help guide the discussion. The paper was intended to serve as an objective analytic tool to frame the core questions regarding how to define opportunity, set benchmarks, and move from benchmarks to actual measures. The document was not a position paper on any of these core issues.

It is our hope that this paper will continue to be used as a framing document for other conversations and seminars involving government policymakers, analysts, and campus leaders. College or university governing boards, for example, may find it useful as questions about increasing or decreasing investment in "opportunity" arise in campus- and state-level discussions. Legislators, governors, members of statewide boards, and others with an interest in investment in postsecondary educational opportunity also may find the document helpful.

TERI, The Institute, and the Council intend to continue to promote dialogues about postsecondary educational opportunity that span ideological and educational perspectives. Such conversations may help improve understanding and aid the development of policy at all levels, thereby contributing to the ongoing national discussion about educational opportunity.

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I. Introduction

The issues of opportunity and participation in postsecondary education are splashed across today's news headlines, ranging from judicial challenges and public debates over affirmative action in admissions policies, to concerns over rising tuitions, to state and institutional funding problems. As students and their families, practitioners, and policymakers alike express concern about the ability to attend college, one thing remains constant: nearly 35 years after the Higher Education Act was first passed, the goal of enabling students to participate in education beyond the high school level remains an important aspect of U.S. public policy.

Since the Higher Education Act was enacted, the number of students enrolling in college and earning undergraduate degrees has risen, as has the importance of higher education in American society. Earning a college degree has become an integral part of the American dream, serving as the ladder out of poverty and into higher income brackets and economic classes. As indicated by recent opinion polling commissioned by the American Council on Education (ACE), the public believes that a college education is a top national priority (ACE, 1998).

In many public policy circles, the value of higher education also has continued to rise. From the strong federal commitments in the 1960s and 1970s that made access to college a possibility for low-income and disadvantaged students, to the more recent focus on improving middle-income affordability through tax credits and loans, themes of educational opportunity have been prominent in public policy discussions. The ongoing support higher education enjoys is evidenced by the increased visibility of the issue in recent election campaigns, particularly at the national and state levels.

But while support for postsecondary education is high, the consensus as to what that opportunity should include and how it should be defined currently does not exist. Indeed, definitions of opportunity frequently are implicit in policy discussions and often are used interchangeably with such concepts as access, equity, and affordability. However, even when opportunity is defined explicitly, it can denote various things to different people. While policymakers may support opportunity, the widely variable definitions often lead to a splintering of focus.[1] Therefore, the very individuals who support opportunity often end up promoting policies and programs that compete with one another for limited resources.

In order to capitalize on higher education's broad support, it is important to come to some type of understanding about how to define opportunity

[1] The ongoing debates about affirmative action in higher education provide an example of the splintering that can occur: proponents of postsecondary educational opportunity in general are at odds over the specifics of opportunity for different subgroups of students.

Higher Education Policy in Election Campaigns

In both the 1992 and 1996 presidential elections and in the 1998 gubernatorial races, higher education was prominently featured. For example:

- Key proposals in the Clinton reelection campaign included tax cuts and tax deductions for higher education expenses targeted at making the 13th and 14th years of education as universal as the first 12, and a new GI Bill for Workers that would allow unemployed workers to obtain job training skills;
- Gubernatorial candidates in Alabama and South Carolina proposed scholarship programs making tuition free at state public institutions for students with at least a B average in high school;
- The Democratic candidate in the California gubernatorial race supported strengthening relationships between public schools and colleges to improve students' college entrance test scores, as well as a tuition freeze for public colleges through 2001; and
- In Massachusetts, one candidate's platform included plans to make community colleges free for most students and to forgive student loans for graduates who go on to teach in the state (Chronicle, 1996 and 1998).

and then demonstrate that progress has been made in achieving the levels of opportunity defined as goals. Without precise meaning behind the terms, progress toward these goals will be hindered. The purpose of this paper is to lay the groundwork for the public and policymakers to reach consensus as to how undergraduate opportunity should be defined and measured by presenting a range of definitional options. The ideas in this paper are intended to promote a discussion about ways to "measure" progress in opportunity, and in subsequent efforts, to document the accomplishments. The ability to measure progress is critical in answering the calls for accountability that pervade the current policy environment.

The structure of the paper includes: a discussion of possible definitions of postsecondary opportunity; a review of possible benchmarks of the minimum achievement levels that must be met to ensure opportunity and indicators of that achievement; a discussion of the role of data in defining and measuring opportunity; and an examination of the future agenda for defining, operationalizing, and measuring the parameters of postsecondary educational opportunity.

II. Defining Opportunity

Defining "opportunity" is essential to the task of building consensus about how to operationalize and measure the goals of postsecondary educational opportunity.[2] Ideally, opportunity would be defined according to each student's own interests and abilities. However, in terms of public policy (particularly at the federal level), it is neither practical nor possible to approach the issue from the individual perspective. A larger lens must be applied to formulate policies and programs that address postsecondary participation more broadly.

Opportunity to participate in undergraduate postsecondary education can encompass a range of educational techniques and approaches. In this paper, we define postsecondary institutions as those eligible for participation in federal student aid programs that are authorized under Title IV of the Higher Education Act.[3] While this description may exclude some institutions, the Title IV construct provides well-defined and widely known parameters that can serve as the basis for policy discussions about opportunity.

In addition, any definition of opportunity must include certain minimal elements or prerequisites. For example, the definition must presume that there are no legal restrictions—such as discrimination on the basis of race or gender—to participation in postsecondary education. The definition also must assume that there are either an adequate number of postsecondary institutions or sufficient institutional capacity through varied modes of delivery and instruction for students to participate.

The scope of defining opportunity can be framed as the question: opportunity to what, for whom? *To what* represents the type of postsecondary educational experience. *For whom* pertains to the population to be included in the definition in two ways: whether it is equal opportunity or simply opportunity for participation in higher education; and whether opportunity is for those students who are college qualified or for the entire population.

The Type of Educational Experience

The type of postsecondary education that is incorporated in the definition varies significantly. The American postsecondary system is comprised of a broad spectrum of educational experiences. At one end of the spectrum, the experience can be any participation in any type of education beyond the high school level—even if it is just participation in one class—at any time in an individual's life. At the other end of the spectrum, the experience includes continuous, full-time participation to the completion of a bachelor's degree. In the middle

[2] The focus of this paper is undergraduate postsecondary educational opportunity. It is referred to simply as opportunity.

[3] Depending on how opportunity is defined, postsecondary education can include participation in a *program* that is not Title IV eligible at an institution that is otherwise Title IV eligible.

of the spectrum, postsecondary education could also include:

- participating in college classes while enrolled in high school;
- taking classes one at a time as needed;
- completing a training or certificate program;
- enrolling in an institution part-time and working toward an associate's or bachelor's degree at intervals (registering, stopping out for a period of time, re-enrolling, stopping out again, etc.);
- enrolling in a two-year institution, transferring to a four-year institution, and completing a bachelor's degree within six years of graduating from high school; and
- participating in training and refresher courses over the span of a lifetime, otherwise known as lifelong learning.

There are countless possibilities and combinations for the type of educational experiences that could be incorporated into a definition of opportunity. Regardless of which type is utilized, it is important to be mindful of the individual students and their experiences. For the purposes of this paper, the polar ends of this definitional spectrum are examined. We recognize that most students currently participate in a type of postsecondary education the falls between the two extremes. For example, most students today attend more than one institution on their way to a bachelor's degree and take more than four years to complete the degree (Adelman, 1999). Nonetheless, these two examples are chosen for the sake of simplicity. We have termed these two examples "Any Type, Any Time" and the "Traditional Baccalaureate."

"Any Type, Any Time" defines opportunity as access to any form of postsecondary education—from attending a two-year or four-year institution, to participating in a certificate program, to taking vocational-technical training. This educational experience can take place anytime after completion of high school, which can be accomplished through graduation or passing the GED or other equivalents, but could also include participation in postsecondary classes while still enrolled in high school. It is not assumed that the achievement of a degree or the completion of a program is intrinsic to opportunity. Rather, this definition is based on the premise that any postsecondary education, regardless of whether a degree is earned, is beneficial to an individual (The Institute for Higher Education Policy, 1998). Continuous enrollment—one of the strongest predictors of postsecondary success—is not necessary and the intensity of the participation is not an issue.

"Traditional Baccalaureate" opportunity is continuous full-time enrollment at one four-year institution, directly after graduating from high school, through completion of a bachelor's degree.[3] Supporters of this definition cite research commissioned by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), which indicates that students participating in postsecondary education in this manner are the most likely to complete their degrees. Immediate enrollment, combined with full-time attendance, substantially enhances a student's likelihood of completing a degree (Choy, 1998a). In addition, this type of participation has been the traditional model for collegiate education beyond the

[3] Some analysts would argue that transfer from a two-year institution to a four-year institution should be included in this definition, given the higher degree completion rate of those who follow the classic transfer pattern, 71 percent versus 68 percent, respectively. (See Adelman, 1999). However, for simplification, this definition does not encompass transfer, even if time to degree is the same.

high school level and was the model upon which the federal student aid programs were designed.

Equal Opportunity or Just Plain Opportunity?

Equality of opportunity often is used in policy discussions as shorthand for describing the broad array of possible goals for various government programs. But *equal* opportunity can denote something much different than just plain opportunity. Plain opportunity consists of making participation in postsecondary education generally available, without consideration of the financial means necessary to attend college. Opportunity without equality would seem to limit participation in higher education, as availability of postsecondary education does not translate into participation for those without the means.

Equal opportunity recognizes this inequality of means and seeks to level the playing field for all students, regardless of race, income, or factors. Two issues lie at the heart of equal opportunity: the amount of support (financial aid, early intervention programs, etc.) necessary to reach the "ideal" of making opportunity available for all students; and the public policies and programs needed to increase the participation of groups of students who cannot or do not participate at levels similar to other groups. This issue has been a predominant theme in policy discussions over the past three decades, as the higher education community has struggled to broaden the availability of postsecondary education.

College Qualified or All Students?

Another important definitional issue is the *college-qualified* status of students. Should opportunity be discussed only with respect to those students who have been adequately prepared for college? As in the case of equal opportunity versus a more generic definition of opportunity, the population of students can be narrowed significantly by imposing this qualification.

Distinguishing the college-qualified status of students in defining opportunity focuses on the notion that those students who are not adequately prepared are not ready for "opportunity" and therefore are unlikely to succeed. Since preparation for college is inherently tied to the quality of the elementary and secondary education, students from poor-quality K-12 systems would be excluded if college preparation is included in the definition of opportunity. Supporters who promote the inclusion of all students, prepared or not, contend that postsecondary education can remedy some of the disparities in quality at the K-12 level.

It is essential to clarify what is meant by "college qualified." Most frequently college qualified refers to being academically prepared for and entering into a four-year institution in the pursuit of a bachelor's degree. MPR Associates Inc. has created a college-qualified index based on high school GPA, senior class rank, aptitude tests, SAT and ACT scores, and classes taken or more specifically participation in a college preparatory curriculum (Berkner and Chavez, 1997). Other descriptions of college-qualified status focus more on preparation at the elementary level and opportunities to learn prior to the postsecondary level.

Where the definition of opportunity is placed along the spectrum of postsecondary experiences implies substantially different meanings for who is college qualified. Most of these views of college qualified would only apply to a definition of opportunity that

identifies the "Traditional Baccalaureate" as the type of educational experience. If "Any Type, Any Time" is the type of educational experience, college qualified simply could mean the mastery of basic literacy skills. Furthermore, the parameters of college qualified includes complex issues, such as the role of open admissions and the provision of remedial instruction at the college level.

Combining the Factors to Form Definitions

These three factors—the *type* of educational experience, whether or not the opportunity is *equal*, and the *college-qualified* status of students—can be used in combination and can have a substantial impact on how narrowly or broadly opportunity is available. Defining opportunity as enrollment of all students, regardless of whether or not they are college qualified, in any type of postsecondary education, at any time, will result in conditions that encourage the largest group of students to participate. In contrast, defining opportunity as enrollment of only those college-qualified students who have the means to attend a four-year institution directly after high school graduation through to the completion of a bachelor's degree will result in a much smaller group of people.

Numerous combinations of these three factors could produce different definitions of opportunity, especially given the variety of types of educational experiences. Focusing on the variation would simply add to the confusion about how opportunity is defined. To avoid such confusion, particularly given this paper's goal of providing clarity to policymakers, it is easiest to limit the discussion of the type of educational experience to the two extreme options: "Any Type, Any Time," and "Traditional Baccalaureate." Given this limitation, there are eight possible combinations.

Defining Opportunity: Examples Of Definitions

The opportunity to participate in undergraduate postsecondary education can be defined as:

- **Definition One:** Any Type, Any Time, Equal Opportunity, All Students
- **Definition Two:** Any Type, Any Time, Equal Opportunity, College-Qualified Students
- **Definition Three:** Any Type, Any Time, Opportunity, College-Qualified Students
- **Definition Four:** Any Type, Any Time, Opportunity, All Students
- **Definition Five:** Traditional Baccalaureate, Equal Opportunity, College-Qualified Students
- **Definition Six:** Traditional Baccalaureate, Equal Opportunity, All Students
- **Definition Seven:** Traditional Baccalaureate, Opportunity, All Students
- **Definition Eight:** Traditional Baccalaureate, Opportunity, College-Qualified Students

Cross-cutting Issues

Several cross-cutting issues merit consideration because they are affected directly by the definition of opportunity, particularly choice and affordability.

How does opportunity affect choice?

Although choice is most often thought of as providing a choice of institution (public or private, two- or four-year) or program type (certificate, associate's, or bachelor's degree), it also refers to the

timing and intensity of enrollment and other institutional characteristics. Depending on how opportunity is defined, choice can be an integral element of opportunity, or merely an interesting add-on. For example, in the "Traditional Baccalaureate" educational experience, choice of institution is essential since students must be able to attend a four-year institution to achieve this level of opportunity. In comparison, if "Any Type, Any Time" is the type of educational experience, choice does not have as great an impact, since the definition does not specify that opportunity must include attendance at a particular type of institution. The issue of choice is a significant component of the continuing equal opportunity discussion: Can all students, or only some students, utilize the enabling mechanisms that allow them to exercise choice?

The question commonly posed in the last few years—access to what?—is encompassed in the discussion of opportunity and choice. While this question frequently has been posed in the context of quality and accountability, it also speaks to a potentially troubling trend in postsecondary participation. Middle- and upper-income students have shifted incrementally from community colleges toward research institutions, while low-income students have remained concentrated in the public sector, particularly at two-year institutions (McPherson and Shapiro, 1998).

What impact does opportunity have on affordability?

The concept of affordability always has been a key issue in higher education policy. Given its subjective nature, there are many ways that affordability can be examined. Simply defined, affordability is whether the amount that students (and their parents) actually have to pay to attend college is within their reach (The Education Resources Institute and The Institute for Higher Education Policy, 1998).

The impact of opportunity on affordability most clearly is related to the type of educational experience that is included in the definition. If opportunity is defined as participation in some form of postsecondary education, being able to "afford" a particular institution or program is not vital, as long as it is possible to attend another institution. Under the most basic interpretation of "Any Type, Any Time"—participating in one class at some point in an individual's lifetime—affordability is not likely to have a great impact on that person's opportunity, unless the price of the class was extremely high. In that case, available aid would be of some assistance or the individual could delay participation until a time when the price was not prohibitive. By comparison, under the "Traditional Baccalaureate" scenario affordability has greater potential impact in light of the higher price of attending a four-year institution through the completion of the bachelor's degree.

Affordability is strongly connected to the issue of equal opportunity. If the definition does not include *equal* opportunity, only those with the means to participate will have opportunity. If the means are not available, affording a college education is an impossibility without additional financial aid support.

What Is the Relationship Between Opportunity and Access?

The relationship between opportunity and access points to the most glaring example of the need for clarification and precision of language. Too often in conversations about postsecondary education, these two terms are used interchangeably, even though they may represent very different concepts to participants involved.

Access, as defined by the National Commission on the Cost of Higher Education, is the ability to attend college (1998). Providing access for a student means that he or she *can* attend postsecondary education. Frequently, the definition of access is confined to the ability to enter postsecondary education, while opportunity addresses the parameters for participation in higher education. Given the fact that postsecondary education opportunity could be defined as access—the ability to enter some form of higher education—compounds the confusion surrounding these two terms. It is important to remember that opportunity could be defined more broadly or more narrowly than just access.

A further complicating factor involves supporters of the view that focusing on just access in higher education policy is not enough. The policies and programs that address students' ability to participate in postsecondary education must focus "on student success, not just access—persistence to completing the degree, not just getting students in the door" (Gladieux and Swail, 1998, p. 101). While some proponents of this view have come to describe it as "opportunity," their use of the term describes a new or different concept. Rather than create a new concept, this paper seeks to clarify and refine how opportunity is defined in terms of the parameters of participation.

III: Setting Benchmarks

The previous chapter identified the elements involved in defining opportunity; this chapter seeks to examine what benchmarks must be in place to measure whether opportunity is achieved. To show this variation, the definitions that result in the broadest and narrowest groups of students are used. The definition that allows for the broadest population to be included is Definition One, which entails equal opportunity for all students, regardless of whether they are college qualified, to enroll in any form of postsecondary education at any time. The narrowest definition is Definition Eight, which consists of opportunity for college-qualified students to achieve the "Traditional Baccalaureate."

What Are Benchmarks?

Once opportunity is defined, policies and programs must be established in order to achieve the goals inherent in the definition. The proper benchmarks are needed to measure the effectiveness of the policies and to provide accountability for policymakers. In her work on student access, Rendon (1998) defines benchmarks as the critical junctures or transitions in the "K-college continuum."

Another approach to benchmarks that is frequently cited is the concept of "pipeline steps." In this analysis, the path to college is considered to be a pipeline, with junctures along the way at critical points that seriously affect a student's ability to reach the goal, which is most often defined as enrollment in a four-year college. As such, the pipeline steps concentrate on the points necessary to ensure that a student entering high school will enroll in a four-year institution after graduating. In one example, the steps are: aspirations for a bachelor's degree; academic preparation for college; taking an entrance exam; applying to college; and enrolling in a college (Horn, 1997).

This particular framework for setting benchmarks for participation in postsecondary education focuses only on an educational experience that resembles the "Traditional Baccalaureate." If the type of educational experience varies, an alternate set of benchmarks and a different time span must be used. In addition, the population included also affects what the benchmarks are.

If opportunity addresses the conditions necessary for participation in postsecondary education, benchmarks can be defined as threshold points along the pathway to achieving opportunity. Although they occur along a progression to postsecondary education, similar benchmarks may appear at multiple times, depending on what is being measured (by indicators) at a specific point. For example, academic preparation can be a benchmark in both elementary and secondary education. At the K-8 level, participation in standardized test taking may be examined. In high school, participation in college prep classes may be reviewed.

Finally, the benchmarks and their corresponding indicators represent the minimal achievement level

FIGURE ONE: Definition One: *Any Type, Any Time, Equal Opportunity, All Students: Any student, regardless of race, gender, etc., can participate in any type of postsecondary education at any time.*

BENCHMARKS	K-8 INDICATORS	HIGH SCHOOL INDICATORS	DELAYED ENROLLMENT INDICATORS	COLLEGE INDICATORS: 1ST AND 2ND YEARS	COLLEGE INDICATORS: 3RD AND 4TH YEARS
Adequate Academic Preparation	Participation in classes/units Participation in extracurricular activities Participation in tutoring, after-school, summer programs Taking standardized tests	Participation in basic skills, general education, and vocational classes Participation in college-prep, honors, AP, IB classes Participation in SAT/ACT prep classes Participation in extracurricular activities Participation in tutoring, after-school, summer programs Taking standardized tests, SATs/ACTs	Participation in remedial classes Participation in skills enhancement classes Participation in job training classes Preparing for college entrance exams, SATs/ACTs Taking standardized tests, SATs/ACTs		
Satisfactory Academic Performance	Standardized test scores Grades	Mastery of basic skills in reading, writing, and mathematics Transfer to higher level classes Standardized test scores GPA Class rank Achievement awards, recognition	Standardized test scores	GPA	GPA
Reasonable Exposure to College	Family experience and aspirations for any degree or certificate Community involvement Participation in education/awareness programs Financial preparations	Family experience and aspirations for any degree or certificate Community involvement College fairs College visits			
Reasonable Exposure to Career Training Opportunities	Exposure to career training	Career fairs After-school job or vocational/in-school training			

NOTE: All indicators will be measured by race/ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status.

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FIGURE ONE: Definition One: *Any Type, Any Time, Equal Opportunity, All Students: Any student, regardless of race, gender, etc., can participate in any type of postsecondary education at any time.*

Benchmarks	K-8 Indicators	High School Indicators	Delayed Enrollment Indicators	College Indicators: 1st and 2nd Years	College Indicators: 3rd and 4th Years
Applying to Colleges		Guidance/counseling Identification of institutions and career opportunities Application process (applying to an institution or program) Financial aid (financing, knowledge of aid, applying for aid/scholarships)	Identification of institutions or programs Application process (applying to an institution or program) Financial aid (financing, knowledge of aid, applying for aid/scholarships)		
Acceptance at a College		Acceptance at a college or program Affordability	Acceptance at a college or program Affordability		
Graduation / Completion*		High school diploma or GED equivalent	GED equivalent	Completion of a degree or certificate, less than a BA	Completion of degree
Enrollment in a College or Program				Enrollment in a college or program	Enrollment in a four-year institution
Persistence *				Completion of steps in a degree or program	Completion of steps in a degree or program
Transfer from a Two-Year to a Four-Year Institution *				Transfer from a two-year to a four-year institution	

NOTE: All indicators will be measured by race/ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status.

* Benchmark does not apply to all students.

needed to ensure opportunity. The primary issue is students' performance and not necessarily their performance *level*. If the issue of choice is considered, performance level would be important for some benchmarks. For example, higher achievement levels in benchmarks associated with academic performance can affect a student's choice of institution, providing options among more selective institutions.

Setting Benchmarks: Two Examples

Using the two definitions of opportunity highlighted earlier, the following matrices outline benchmarks and possible corresponding indicators for the specific conditions established in each definition. The function of the matrix is twofold: to show benchmarks along a timeline in relation to the educational opportunity as it is defined; and to demonstrate the ramifications of the choices made in defining opportunity. The examples used present some situations that would most likely be considered undesirable to various groups of the higher education community, as segments of the population and portions of the education process fall outside the parameters set by the definitions.

Definition One (Figure One)

Given the nature of this definition, the benchmarks are broad based, encompassing elementary school through college. Because equal opportunity is included in the definition, all of the indicators would be measured by race/ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status or other variables. If equal opportunity were being achieved, we would expect that the rates of participation among subgroups would be the same or moving closer to one another. Because the type of postsecondary education is not restricted to a four-year degree, or even to a degree or certificate program, less "traditional" aspects such as exposure to career training opportunities and transfer from a two-year to a four-year institution are included as benchmarks.

One of the most notable aspects of the matrix for this definition is the inclusion of delayed enrollment as a timeframe. Since this definition assumes that individuals could participate in postsecondary education at any point in their life, there are certain benchmarks that apply to this period regardless of whether they participate in postsecondary education immediately after high school graduation or 20 years later. The indicators of benchmarks in this time frame focus on preparing the student for entry, which may involve either taking steps that were never completed as a high school student, such as finishing high school, taking college entrance exams, or preparing for college by taking remedial courses or other skills enhancement training.

Another important feature of this matrix is the inclusion of elementary level benchmarks and indicators. Since this definition includes *all* students, not just college-qualified individuals, the process of forming aspirations and becoming qualified for college (or some form of postsecondary education) is incorporated.

Definition Eight (Figure Two)

The population included in this definition is narrow, since it includes the most specific type of educational experience ("Traditional Baccalaureate"). No distinctions are made between equal opportunity and plain opportunity, and students must be college qualified. Putting aside the issue of equal opportunity, the benchmarks and indicators in this matrix closely mirror the pipeline steps to enrolling in a four-year institution as previously mentioned. Academic preparation is limited since college-qualified status

FIGURE TWO: Definition Eight: *The Traditional Baccalaureate, Opportunity, College Qualified: All students who are qualified can enroll full-time at a four-year institution immediately after graduating from high school, continuing straight through to the completion of a bachelor's degree within four years.*

BENCHMARKS	HIGH SCHOOL INDICATORS	COLLEGE INDICATORS
Satisfactory Academic Performance		GPA
Reasonable Exposure to College	Family experience and aspirations for a BA Community involvement College and career fairs College visits	
Applying to a Four-Year Institution	Guidance/counseling Identification of four-year institutions Application process (applying to a four-year institution) Financial aid (financing, knowledge of aid, applying for aid/scholarships)	
Acceptance at a Four-Year Institution	Acceptance at a four-year institution	
Completion	Completion of high school	Completion of BA
Enrollment in a Four-Year Institution Immediately Following High School		Enrollment in a four-year institution
Full-time Attendance		Full-time attendance
Persistence		Completion of all four years of college without interruption or transfer
Satisfactory Academic Progress		Completion of required courses on time

assumes the completion of steps necessary to enter a four-year institution (i.e. taking standardized tests). Because of the college-qualified status, which focuses on the steps taken by high school students, benchmarks and indicators are not included for the elementary school level.

The continuous, full-time enrollment "conditions" of this definition of opportunity place more emphasis on benchmarks and indicators that occur after a student is enrolled in a four-year institution. Persistence and satisfactory academic progress are important components in ensuring that a student completes the degree.

IV. Moving From Benchmarks to Measures

Data provide specific measurements that can show the "status" of opportunity (who attends, how many, etc.), the progress that has been made over time, and the comparative opportunity that different groups enjoy. While it is the individual student's opportunity for postsecondary education that is of concern, individual opportunity cannot be measured. Instead, the opportunity of groups in postsecondary education is the focus of efforts to measure opportunity.

Examples of data are provided to illustrate some of the indicators for the benchmarks, as well as possible problems in moving from benchmarks to measures. They are not intended to be all inclusive or even necessarily the most appropriate measures. These illustrations merely suggest the ways in which measures that conform to the benchmarks can be developed.

For a specific benchmark, indicators and measures of those indicators will differ depending upon the concept of opportunity used. To demonstrate this, we can examine one of the benchmarks that is common to virtually all conceptions of higher education opportunity—enrollment in college.

Using the previously explained framework, the benchmark of "enrollment" can be measured through various indicators across the proposed definitions. Within the context of Definition One ("Any Type, Any Time"), the ideal measure of enrollment would be the percentage of all students who enroll in any postsecondary institution—whether immediately after high school graduation or on a delayed timeframe—broken down by such characteristics as income, gender, race/ethnicity, and geographic location. Under Definition Eight ("Traditional Baccalaureate"), the appropriate measure would be the percentage of all college-qualified high school students who enroll in a four-year institution immediately following graduation.

Published data on various aspects of enrollment may or may not coincide with the most appropriate measure, given a specific definition of opportunity. The following major sources of data regarding college enrollment are generally used by researchers:

- Perhaps the most common indicator of college enrollment is immediate transition from high school to college, measured as the percentage of high school completers ages 16 to 24 who were enrolled in college the October after they graduated from high school. This indicator is generated from Census Bureau data collected through the October updates to the Current Population Survey (CPS), which include supplemental questions on school enrollment.[5] These data may be broken down by age, enrollment

[5] Respondents were counted as enrolled if they were enrolled at any time during the current term or school year in any type of "regular" school, i.e., a school that may advance a person toward an elementary, secondary, college, or professional school degree. A college student need not be working toward a degree, but must be enrolled in a class for which credit would be applied toward a degree. Enrollment in trade schools, business colleges, and other schools that do not advance students to regular school degrees is not included.

level (year of college), type of institution (two-year/four-year, public/private), family income, gender, and race/ethnicity, and attendance status (full-time/part-time).[6] The percentage of high school completers enrolled in college for other age ranges may be calculated.

- In terms of aggregate numbers, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) annually collects enrollment data from virtually all postsecondary institutions through its Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). In particular, fall enrollment data are gathered by race/ethnicity, institutional type, gender, level of study (including first-time freshmen), and attendance status. In odd years, fall enrollment data by age of students are collected separately.

- NCES also sponsors several longitudinal data sets. For example, the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS), which tracks an eighth-grade cohort from 1988, allows the calculation of the percentage of college-qualified 1992 high school graduates who attended various types of postsecondary institutions by 1994. The four-year college qualification index is based on high school GPA, senior class rank, NELS 1992 aptitude test, SAT and ACT scores, and curricular rigor. A similar analysis could be accomplished for all 1992 high school graduates, not just those who are college qualified, or the definition of college qualified could be adjusted. In addition, the percentages can be broken down by family income, race/ethnicity, gender, and other student characteristics. Such analyses cannot be done for every eighth-grade cohort, as longitudinal studies occur only sporadically. (Prior longitudinal data sets include High School and Beyond, which spans 1980 to 1992, and the National Longitudinal Survey of 1972, which spans 1972 to 1986.)[7]

- Data from NCES' National Household Education Survey (NHES) show the participation rates of adults age 17 or older in various types of adult education activities including part-time higher education, work-related courses, and basic skills education during the previous 12 months. However, these participation rates do not include adults whose only form of participation is as a full-time student pursuing a degree.

Many of these indicators are presented in two annual NCES publications, the *Condition of Education* and *the Digest of Education Statistics*. However, the form in which enrollment data are presented may not be the most appropriate. In some cases, the appropriate enrollment measures can be constructed from the individual records; in other cases, this may be difficult, if not impossible, to do. For example, only the longitudinal data sets can be used effectively to look at college-qualified students alone, yet this analysis can be conducted only for certain years.

Over the entire range of possible benchmarks and indicators, data play an interesting role in the public policy discussion regarding opportunity. Where data once were looked to as a measure of a

[6] Other variables include employment status, family type, metropolitan status, region, marital status, years of education completed, and mother's education level. Published data normally are broken down by only a few of these variables, and use census population controls. For more details on the Current Population Survey, see *Definitions and Explanations*, available from the Bureau of the Census website (www.census.gov).

[7] Other NCES data sets, such as the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS), describe only those students who enrolled in college, and therefore cannot shed light on enrollment rates except in a more indirect manner.

definition of opportunity, the availability of data has become the driver in how we define and speak of opportunity. The vocabulary and the benchmarks are now cast in terms that fit the available data. Because some measures of enrollment are more commonly presented (or more readily available) than others, the tendency has been to use these available measures rather than evaluate whether or not they are appropriate to any specific conception of opportunity.

In particular, the widespread use of one indicator of enrollment—the percentage of high school completers ages 16 to 24 who were enrolled in college the October of the year they graduated from high school—is consistent with a definition of opportunity that involves the immediate transition of high school graduates into any postsecondary institution. Yet this measure does not work as well with other definitions of opportunity. For example, it does not reflect students who did not immediately enter postsecondary education after graduation from high school, and would be less useful within the framework of opportunity found in Definition One. Overall, the prevalence of a specific enrollment indicator has encouraged a certain definition of opportunity even if the definition has not been accepted explicitly, rather than the opposite.

V. Agenda For The Future

Despite more than three decades of national commitment to the goal of making postsecondary educational "opportunity" a reality for all Americans, it is ironic that little consensus has been achieved regarding what that opportunity entails. The absence of clear understanding about how to define opportunity, how to measure it, and how to turn those measures into specific indicators has served as a major impediment to consensus-oriented public policy discussions. The result has been limited funding, legislative gridlock, and a lack of consistency in determining what the allocated monies are designed to accomplish.

This paper provides an overview of the range of possible ways to define, operationalize, and measure the parameters of higher education opportunity. The goal of the paper is to inform the debate and arrive at a broad, inclusive set of parameters. However, even within the constraints discussed, there are important issues that are not adequately analyzed or incorporated. Future papers and studies need to build on the groundwork established in this paper and examine several issues, including:

- how to define opportunity for non-traditional students with different goals and lifestyles who do not fit the "Traditional Baccalaureate" definition of an 18-year-old high school graduate who enrolls in college full time;
- whether something exists beyond the "Traditional Baccalaureate" standard that incorporates graduate and professional-level education in determining what opportunity is;
- how to measure the opportunity that students have even if they do not choose to pursue it (opportunity offered but not taken);
- how to define and measure opportunity for lifelong learning, spanning an entire adult lifetime;
- what role distance learning and the rapid changes it brings may play in the ongoing dialogue about postsecondary educational opportunity; and
- what opportunity to a postsecondary education in the United States signifies in comparison to other nations' postsecondary educational systems.

Whatever consensus is reached in the process of defining postsecondary educational opportunity, another key issue for the future is determining what data are needed to measure progress in achieving the defined goals. Rather than frame the discussion about opportunity based on data that are currently available, researchers and policymakers must take a step back and determine what "new" data need to be collected. In particular, the current national data sets from the National Center for Education Statistics, the Census Bureau, The College Board, and other sources should be reviewed to determine specific changes or additions needed for future data collection efforts.

Finally, discussions regarding who should be responsible for the data collection efforts, and how

those data should be disseminated for public policy purposes, must take place. For example, the collection of data based on a commonly agreed upon definition of opportunity could allow for the annual publication of an index of postsecondary educational opportunity. Such an index could be constructed by an "official" source, such as the National Center for Education Statistics, or could be developed by a broad coalition of organizations and interests. In either case, the publication of an index would allow for the regular measurement of progress toward achieving the defined goals and thereby further the public policy agenda.

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